

# Using Storybooks to Promote Early Literacy in Kenya



Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, early literacy remains very low, and existing interventions have not proven to be cost-effective.<sup>1</sup> Children from rural areas are particularly at risk for below-average literacy skills due to a lack of age-appropriate literary resources, low rates of caregiver literacy, and low levels of teacher support. One reason for this may be that parents do not have the resources to support their children's home-based learning before they enter primary school. A pilot in 2016 found that children demonstrated book use when provided with books, and that over 80 percent of caregivers invited to a training on book use and reading with children attended. Researchers in Kenya are now working with Innovations for Poverty Action to evaluate the long-term literacy effects of a program that distributes children's books and conducts trainings with the primary caregivers of children age 3 to 6.

## Policy Issue

Low literacy is a problem plaguing many developing countries. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, many primary school children read below grade level.<sup>2</sup> Poor home-based support of learning may be a key cause, alongside factors like overcrowded classrooms and a lack of support and training for teachers. Many children face an uphill climb after entering primary school without the literacy preparation necessary for school readiness. Policymakers are interested in education interventions that have an impact on students before they reach primary school. One strategy that may be effective in this regard is distributing children's books to families with children who are old enough to begin learning to read but have not yet entered primary school. This strategy may be particularly effective when combined with trainings for parents in dialogic reading, a technique that involves engaging children in conversation about the text while reading.

## Evaluation Context

This evaluation is taking place in rural Luo-speaking areas in Kisumu County, western Kenya. Most children in Kenya struggle to achieve basic literacy: seven out of 10 third-grade students are unable to read at a second-grade level.<sup>3</sup> Even by fifth grade, many children are not reading at a second-grade level. These problems are particularly prevalent in rural regions, where primary school teachers have high rates of absenteeism and receive little support or training. Outside of the classroom, most children have few opportunities for reading education before they reach primary school. A 2011 survey in the region where this study is taking place found that 84 percent of children under the age of five

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### COUNTRY

Kenya

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### PROGRAM AREA

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### TIMELINE

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lived in homes without a single children's book.<sup>4</sup> When households do contain children's books, they are almost always in one of the official national languages, rather than in the dialect that children usually learn as their first language.<sup>5</sup>

## Details of the Intervention

Researchers working with Innovations for Poverty Action are conducting a randomized evaluation to study the effects of a basic book distribution program on children's vocabulary, early language development skills, and academic achievement. The study is tracking two main outcomes: whether storybook distribution leads to long-term gains in pre-literacy skills, and whether the language of the distributed storybooks has any impact on gains in literacy skills.

The evaluation is investigating the impacts of book distribution along with a training in dialogic reading (a technique that involves engaging children in conversation about the text while reading) and whether the language of the books given has impacts on child learning. Researchers have randomly assigned 76 catchment areas, comprised of 3,000 households with approximately 4,000 children, to one of three groups:

- A group that is receiving five children's books in English and a dialogic reading training
- A group that is receiving five children's books in vernacular (Dhuluo) and a dialogic reading training
- A comparison group.

In addition to the initial survey, researchers will conduct a follow-up survey roughly 6 weeks after the intervention and a two-year post-intervention survey in 2020.

## Results and Policy Lessons

Research is ongoing; results forthcoming.

## Sources

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